Tarry Town

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Tarry Town

by StratsWrote, whiskeyandspite

Summary

He had expected, when he'd received his missive, that Sleepy Hollow would be quaint and quiet. A few farms about, a little village square, some young families and old folks enjoying their golden years. He'd expected that he would enjoy his position as the new school master for the months it took for his wedding to be arranged, and then he would leave.

Passing over the bridge now, the wood groaning beneath Gunpowder's hooves, Will felt like he'd entered purgatory.

A schoolmaster, Mr. Will Graham, comes to Tarry Town, Sleepy Hollow, to meet his betrothed, Miss Alana Bloom. But not everything is as it seems here. Legends and ghost stories, shadowy figures, unexpected infatuations... curioser and curioser.

Notes

Based more on the original story and legend of Sleepy Hollow than its film adaptations, we do have a plan to continue this one but it'll be an ongoing project, once every couple months. Sorry! But we have so many things on and such awesome ideas from so many great people that we just can't keep up sometimes!

See the end of the work for more notes

Sleepy Hollow didn't really live up to its name, from Will's first impression of it.

To be fair, he did arrive in the middle of a torrential downpour that turned most of the countryside into a cesspool of muck and misery. Even the greenest grass appeared sick with how the water made the earth look swollen. Will gently guided his horse forward towards the rickety-looking bridge and the little township of Tarry Town beyond.

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It wasn't that the town was unwelcoming, per se, it was that he genuinely didn't want to be there. He'd been summoned by an acquaintance of his father - now long dead, rest his soul - imploring Will to take the hand of a lovely young woman who was of marriageable age in a town with no prospects.

Will had always been empathetic towards struggle, especially struggle by those society already deemed weak, and he'd replied with acquiescence to the betrothal. He'd only found out his bride-to-be's name the day before.

Alana Bloom. Names could tell one very little about a person, but it was a fine enough name regardless. He'd been told she was both pretty and bright, two things that would be beneficial if Will absolutely *had* to marry.

He'd never intended to, before this, and he still looked upon the prospect with some dread. Still, most men his age were married. It could only have been a matter of time.

If the town itself was a dreary sort of misery, Will's lodgings were even more so. The house was of more than adequate size, but dismal condition. The door stuck, the floors creaked when he walked, and his horse had seemed all too nervous to be penned within the rickety stable. He could only hope a strong gust didn't come in the night and bring the whole thing down about their heads.

It was clear from Will's appointment here that Mr. Crawford hoped to entice him to stay. There was far too much room here for any one man, or even a newly wedded couple. One room had clearly been a nursery of some sort, connected to a smaller room for a nanny. Many furnishings were still in place. It was a wonder, or more accurately an oddity, that Mr. Crawford asked for so little in return for Will's stay here.

Will avoided the master bedroom, where a lady's hope chest still rested at the foot of the bed. He suspected a great misfortune had befallen the previous owners, for them to have left so much behind, and he didn't desire to spend the night in the marital bed of some poor, devastated couple.

He chose, instead, the room at the very top of the stairs, with a window overlooking the marsh. It looked as occupied as any of the others, but with a tidy, impersonal touch. Will set his bag on the desk and his clothes in the closet, and tried not to breathe in too much dust.

The storm raged. And while it wasn't yet too late Will decided to seek out for some supper. Back on went his overcoat and heavy boots. He didn't risk an umbrella with such high winds, and instead popped the collar and ducked his head.

He found an inn with inviting warm light and made his way over, shaking the worst of the rain from his coat as he closed the door behind himself. Within, it wasn't crowded but it was lively. Someone played the piano a little deeper in the space, and the sound carried clanking and a little out of tune around the patrons within.

Will made his way to the bar and caught the attention of the person behind it. THey had on curious clothes, and their straight black hair pulled back in a twisted knot at the base of their neck. Until she turned, Will had assumed the innkeeper was a man, and was startled to find himself very wrong indeed. She hardly took offence, her grin was blinding.

"You must be the new schoolmaster," she said, resting her weight against the heel of her hand on the scuffed up bar. "Mr. Graham. Nice to put a very handsome face to a name."

"Oh," Will was flustered. He'd never been good at taking compliments, and he'd never had such blatantly shameless ones from a woman. "Thank you, that's very kind. Umm. I'm afraid I've arrived in terrible weather to an empty house and I think without supper I won't be able to sleep the night."

"Don't blame you," the woman replied, raising an eyebrow. "Nothing puts one down like a full belly and some company."

"I -" Will's eyes widened and she laughed again.

"Don't panic yourself. Are all city boys so chaste nowadays? Looks like I left at the right time. Take a seat, I'll bring you some supper and a pint. On the house, so I don't scare you off before you've even met Crawford."

"It really isn't necessary," Will tried to say, but she merely waved him off and disappeared into the kitchen.

Supper was hot, at least, warning him from the inside out. The innkeeper, a miss Beverly Katz, settled herself in beside him to chat. Will had never been much for conversation, but he always tried to be respectful, and he didn't seem able to fend her off.

"Don't mind me," she said, "it's been ages since we had fresh meat. People don't stay long."

"That's a shame," Will said politely, though he too would be gone as soon as he could manage it.

"It is!" Bev agreed. "Just because of some *stupid* legend-"

“It’s not stupid,” insisted a man passing by. To Will’s abject horror, he dropped into a chair at the table, scowling at Bev. “I’ve seen him.”

“You *say* you’ve seen him,” Bev corrected, “But Price says you were drunk again.”

“I was stone cold sober,” the man growled, “and I’ve seen him.”

“Seen who?” Will asked despite himself. Bev groaned.

“Fine,” she said with a wave, “go ahead, Z. Tell the story.”

“You know much about Tarry Town at all?” the man - Z - asked, and Will shook his head. “Well, there’s not much to know, honestly. Bet you didn’t even know we existed til you were brought here for whatever reason, huh? Yeah, neither. Well, they same some Hessian soldier got his head blown off by a cannonball not far from here. Really must’ve pissed the guy off because he’s about every damn foggy night of the year riding around trying to claim himself a head before he rides off into hell.”

“No he doesn’t,” Bev mumbled, reaching to take a piece of bread from Will’s plate and tug off a chunk to chew. “The legend says he’s going to keep looking for a head til he finds one, then he’ll disappear.”

“And where do you think he’ll *go* , Bev? To Connecticut?” Z gestured, looking at Will again who had stopped eating altogether, a little too caught up. “He’s looking for a head so he can ride into hell victorious. Til then, he carries a substitute beneath his arm as he rides, eyes glowing in the night with the flames of Satan himself.”

“Okay, Z,” Bev shoved his shoulder. “Go on. Git. If you’ve scared off the new schoolmaster before Jack’s even met him it’ll be your hide.”

Z stood, hands up before him in defence. “I only tell what I know, and I only know what I’ve seen, and I’ve seen him riding around with something under his arm with glowing eyes, I swear on my life.”

“And what a life it is, soaked to the bone in gin,” Bev drawled. Z shot her a dirty look, then turned his gaze to Will.

“Be careful in the fog. He’ll find you. Just like he found the last folks who lived up in that old house.”

“Oh for the love of- They got sick, Z, everybody knows that!”

Z glowered at Bev. “Everybody *says* that.”

And on that rather ominous note, he turned on his heel and marched out of the inn. Bev sighed and rested her head in her hands. Will wondered if he was meant to pat her shoulder.

“You *shouldn’t* go out on foggy nights,” she finally said, “but not because of some old spirit. Because of the *roads* , and the cracks in between. You’ll trip into the marsh and we won’t find your body until the summer draughts.

“Noted,” Will said, with a rather generous swallow of his beer.

"And the people in the place you're in? The husband was called away on business to Gibraltar or somewhere and his wife took the kids to her parents' in Michigan when her youngest got pox. No spirit got to them."

Will laughed at that, inclining his head in thanks. "Also noted. They've left a lot of things…"

"Yeah, and no note as to what to do with any of it. Place has been empty for months now, I suppose if they were going to come back for it they would have by now."

Will hummed and took up his fork to finish his dinner. The rest of the meal was passed in moderate quiet until Beverly excised herself to tend to some customers at the bar. He was comfortably full and a little buzzed on the beer by the time he waved to her in thanks and took up his coat to shoulder on again.

He supposed come morning he would meet Jack Crawford and find out where he was to work and where to find groceries for his own meals. His salary was hardly one that allowed for nightly outings to Ms. Katz' establishment.

As he strode home - the rain had eased somewhat - he couldn't help but look out past the bridge where fog was slowly settling on the moors beyond. He paused in his step and narrowed his eyes. A shadow moved and disappeared and Will laughed, shaking his head.

Nonsense.

All nonsense. He was a learned man with no time for superstitious stories. He made it to his home without incident, and slept without waking til morning.

Miss Alana Bloom was a lovely young woman, approximately Will’s own age. She was, all things considered, exactly the sort of person Will might have chosen for a bride, had he the inclination.

Of course, he didn’t have the inclination, and so their introduction the next morning was stilted and awkward.

“Why don’t you two take a walk,” Mr. Crawford has suggested, “Get to know each other a little better.”

And so they had taken a walk, meandering down streets Will had no knowledge of, wandering through places he’d never been. Miss Bloom seemed quite at home, and it prickled at Will’s sense of guilt. Would she enjoy being whisked away from the town she’d grown up in? Or would she, perhaps, be resentful of Will for taking her from the life she’d known.

“There,” Miss Bloom said, breaking him from his reverie. “There are two grand estates in our little corner of the world. There used to be three, but I’m afraid your lodgings have fallen into disrepair.”

They had indeed, but Will politely made no remark on it. Alana gestured across the fields. One house sat amidst horse pastures, the other was set back against the marshes, brightly lit on such a sunny day, but no doubt gloomy in the fog.

“The one with the horse stables, that’s the Verger estate. My very dear friend Margot and her brother live there. And over there is where the Lecters used to live, a whole pack of them. I’m afraid it’s only Hannibal now, his uncle moved away some time ago, and his parents passed when we were small. But Hannibal keeps up with it. He’s the type to want everything in its place. He’d thought once to marry me,” she added, with a cautious look at Will.

Will’s brow went up, but his smile was warm. He waited for Alana’s expression to ease once more and for her to answer on her own.

“We are still good friends. He is a lovely young man. But we both realized that we... could not make each other happy.”

Will wondered if either he or Alana could lie to themselves enough to believe they could make each other happy. He wondered at his dogged determination to be kind, to help. He said nothing and set his gloved hand on top of Alana’s where she held to his arm. She cleared her throat.

“I suppose you’ll meet him soon. He hosts the most lavish dinner parties at the house, any excuse for them and he fills the ballrooms with music and wine.”

“What does he do outside of that?” Will asked. Alana shrugged, guiding Will to start walking again.

“What do any of us with too many means and too much time? He studied abroad for a time, I remember, but now...I’m not sure.”

“And you?”

Alana hummed, dimples showing on her cheeks as she looked sidelong at Will. “I’ll admit, I’m a dreamer. I imagine a life I’m unsure I could ever live but I rather enjoy myself.”

“And what do you imagine?” Will asked, earnest. Perhaps he could help if it was in his power to. He already felt protective of the young woman, though nothing more. And he was no stranger to dreaming of unrealistic lives.

“I imagine,” Alana started, smile widening, “that I myself can study abroad. Or even here, but in the city.”

“And can’t you?”

“Not in the field of my interest,” Alana shrugged. “I know who I am expected by society to be. A homemaker, a hostess, a pleasant and pretty wife, raising pretty and pleasant children.”

“What would you do,” Will asked her, “if you hadn’t societal expectations on your shoulders?”

“I would be an alienist,” Alana told him in a conspiratorial whisper. “I’ve read about them in the papers, and it’s the most fascinating thing. Can you imagine? Medicine that is based entirely on the human mind, on conversing with the patient, getting them to disclose their troubles and possibly even diagnose themselves.”

Will squeezed her hand again. “Perhaps if we leave for the city, I would be able to write to some school friends of mine.”

“Mr. Graham, you needn’t indulge my childish whims,” she laughed. “But it’s very kind of you.”

“It seems to me,” Will suggested gently, “that a life is a very long time. If we are to share ours, it is in our best interests to be as happy as we can be with each other.”

“So very serious, Mr. Graham.” Alana eyed him curiously. “Do you find marriage to be such an unfortunate prospect?”

He felt as though her bright eyes could see right through him. He fidgeted uncomfortably with the hem of his jacket. “Miss Bloom,” He began, “I assure you that, as a husband, I will be as dedicated as I know how.”

A tight furrow drew itself between Alana’s brows. He wondered if she was disbelieving, but her features smoothed out shortly after.

“Marriage is a frightening prospect for many,” She said softly. “I am fortunate to have a groom as certain as you.

Alana was a mystery. Beverly was a firebrand. The children Will was meant to teach were a combination of hoodlums and wallflowers. Tarry Town was an odd little village, and as the days passed. Will found himself more and more certain he wanted to leave.

He and Alana were to be married in the summer, but it was only autumn now. The weather was wet, and the fogs rolled in nightly, thick as curtains.

While Will had taken Z’s story in and let it meander about in his imagination, he still wasn’t certain he believed in a ‘headless horseman’. Despite this, Will often caught himself seeking for movement in the fog as he walked home, looking for a flash of fire where there couldn’t possibly be any, out in the empty moors.

It was a curious obsession, but one Will found brought a strange sort of comfort to him. There was so little to do in the entirety of Sleepy Hollow that seeking for shapes and spectres in the fog turned out to be an addictive hobby.

It was on one such foggy evening that Hannibal Lecter held a dinner party. Will found out through Alana who joyfully delivered the news on their lunch-time walk.

“I was wondering why he had held off hosting,” Alana had said. She and Will walked daily, now, and Will was finding that while he could never love Alana as she deserved, he could see

them becoming very close friends. She was interesting and clever, filled with gumption that Will rarely saw even in the cities.

“Apparently he has been away, off gallivanting and enjoying himself in New York, I suppose. What luck it is to be born a man.”

Will comforted her with the reminder that most men worth their salt were still far more clueless to life’s intricacies and excitements than a woman could be and Alana had leaned into him with a smile.

“You will come, of course?” She’d added. “It would be a dull affair without you there, Will.”

“I’m not the best company,” Will tried, and Alana shook her head, seeing right through his excuses.

“You’re wonderful company. Any who can’t see that are simply not clever enough. So you will come, and you will have a wonderful evening with us all.”

Will had smiled, squeezing her hand. “I will,” he agreed.

Will allowed Gunpowder to pick his way along the safest route to get them both to the Lecter house once dusk set in. He had worn his best frock coat and cravat, and a hat he’d only brought because he’d had no one in Connecticut to leave it with.

It was not the sort of loud, drinking party that Will had avoided in the past. He was greeted at the door by a man with a sharp smile and sharper eyes. He took Will’s coat and greeted him with a warmth that seemed out of place for a first meeting.

“You must be the famous schoolteacher, then,” The man said.

“And you, the generous host?”

The man’s smile ticked ever so slightly up at the corners. “Hannibal Lecter,” He said, holding out a hand to shake, “At your service, sir.”

“Will Graham.” Hannibal had a firm grip. Here was a man used to introductions and gathering friends. Will felt ever-so-slightly overwhelmed.

“Come in, Mr. Graham. You’ve arrived just in time for appetizers.”

Appetizers were eaten standing, with a glass of wine in one hand. Will sequestered himself awkwardly in a corner, on the lookout for Alana. So far, she was nowhere to be seen, but people were still arriving, the beginnings of the ‘fashionably late’ crowd that came before the few ‘genuinely late’ stragglers.

When Alana finally arrived, it was with her hands on the arm of another young woman. She was striking, and carried herself like a queen, and Will had to assume this was Margot, the friend Alana had spoken of. Both were dressed in beautiful gowns and had eyes only for each other, and in that moment something struck Will and manifested itself as a lump in his throat.

He knew that look. That longing gaze, that desperate need to be close. He understood it to the depths of his very being.

How could he take Alana from Sleepy Hollow now, when the love of her life had an estate and standing here? Perhaps his foolish plan to build them a life of comfort and friendship was just that, foolish. Impossible and almost cruel in its offering.

Will downed his wine almost too quickly and caught a cough against the back of his wrist.

“Downing another right after is said to help,”

Will swung around to the voice and laughed when he saw Beverly. She wasn’t dressed in a gown, she was dressed similarly to how Will was, which was at once unsurprising and entirely strange.

“Have you closed the inn for the night?”

“God no, I can barely keep up with rent as it is. I left Z in charge.”

Will smiled. “You trust him?”

“As much as anyone,” Bev grinned, taking Will’s empty glass and replacing it with a full one as an attendant passed them by with a tray. “We grew up next door to each other. He knows I can kick his ass.”

Will’s smile widened and he ducked his head. Beverly had a way of frightening him and making him feel comfortable all at once. He was glad she’d been invited.

“You met the host yet?”

“Mr. Lecter?”

“Doctor,” Beverly corrected him, amused. “As of last summer. Hot stuff isn’t he? Damn. If I were that way inclined.”

“That way -”

“Rich and pompous sorts,” Bev’s smile was wicked and Will swallowed, wondering if he’d given himself away. “I like me the down and dirty types. Farmboys and the like. But Hannibal’s charming, and to give him credit he does take care of his estate very well practically on his own.”

“It’s quite a lot of house for one man,” Will noted. Even the open den they’d settled into was vast, with carefully chosen and dusted art pieces throughout.

“Well, it’s his family home. The Lecters have been a part of this town since its inception. But it’s just the doctor left, I’m afraid.”

Alana had said as much. She was, even now, standing beneath a portrait of two children, one who must have been the good doctor when he was younger.

This town had a history. It had people and stories that Alana knew, that she loved.

The town was going to keep him, Will knew that with a sudden, sinking certainty. He had ridden into his doom, his purgatory, and there he would stay. He would not pry someone else from their happiness.

He left Beverly, letting himself out onto the terrace instead. He needed air, a breath.

“You seem so melancholy.”

Will tried to school his expression; surprise and displeasure warring before he chose resignation. He couldn’t escape conversation when there was a room full of people and an attentive host. With a sigh, Will looked over his shoulder and offered Hannibal an apologetic look.

“Homesick, I’m afraid.” he lied. “I’m not used to being somewhere it’s so quiet outside.

“I find I miss the city nights the most when the Hollow fills with fog,” Hannibal agreed, coming to stand next to Will where he leaned over the railing. Will puffed an amused breath through his nose.

“Don’t tell me you, too, believe in the horseman.”

“I see you’ve been regaled with the tale already.”

“It seems to be everyone’s hobby, here, to scare the newcomer.” Will shrugged. “I’ve yet to see hide or hair of him, though it’s been foggy night after night since my arrival.”

“Don’t so easily tempt fate, Mr Graham,” Hannibal told him, tilting his head to regard Will. Will expertly avoided his eyes. “Perhaps now that you’ve called upon him, he will not leave you be.”

Will laughed then, openly, and narrowed his eyes at Hannibal. “Very well. I challenge whatever creature rides the moors headless to come and seek me out, should he have the time.”

Hannibal’s answering smile made the pit of Will’s stomach drop, and he immediately looked away. He sought for an excuse to leave, to return inside, to return home, but found nothing. He could feel Hannibal’s warmth close against his side and it took everything not to lean into him.

There had been a moment, back home, when Will had thought surely he would seek something out. When men had seemed attainable, when life had seemed like it was just a bit more in his control.

And then that moment had ended.

But Will was still aware of men, of the shape of them, of the shape of *Hannibal* in particular, the angles of his face and the way lamplight caught him as it spilled from the open door.

“Be wary of the marsh, Mr. Graham. It has ways of sucking people into it.”

“So I’m told,” Will said, shaking his head. “They’ll find my body come summer.”

Hannibal smiled, amused. “You’ll be quite well preserved, at least.”

And then he truly would dwell in the town forever. Will sighed, stepping back towards the warmth of the house. “You have a lovely home, Dr. Lecter. Thank you for your hospitality, but I think I’ll take my leave.”

“That’s a shame, I hate to see you go,” Hannibal said, and Will felt a pang of something. He sounded sincere. Will wanted it to be sincere. He wanted to sleep, suddenly; he felt like the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

“Perhaps we’ll see each other again.”

“I am certain we shall.”

Will didn’t look back, didn’t offer his hand to shake, didn’t do anything but make his way back inside and deposit his glass to a spare table. There were enough people now that he could make his way out without anyone pulling him aside or calling his name. Perhaps that was rude, just leaving when dinner hadn’t yet been served, but Will felt… strange staying. Seeing Alana and Margot had brought up sensations he’d thought long ago buried. Hannibal’s appearance had cemented them into the center of his mind, and Will needed to deal with them alone.

Gunpowder fussed at being taken from the well-appointed stables so soon, but Will soothed him with a hand to his neck, sneaking him a sugar cube from his pocket.

The ride home was uneventful, and the house was just as miserable upon his arrival to it. Perhaps he should start to make it feel more homely, now that it was clear Will was staying for the rest of his life. Perhaps, but not tonight. Tonight he needed to get into bed and hope for dreamless slumber.

End Notes

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